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THE REVISION OF THE BELGIAN CONSTITUTION IN 1893.

THE constitution which had governed the Kingdom of Belgium since February 7, 1831, and which in the meantime had not undergone the slightest change, was subjected in 1893¹ to a revision of the most serious sort. The reform is undoubtedly the most important event that has occurred in Belgium since this country won the position of an independent state. It is difficult at present to forecast the various consequences which changes of so fundamental a character will necessarily entail, but it is safe to say that in the near future they will transform the conditions of political life in Belgium.

The nature of the reform may best be indicated by saying that it substitutes a democratic for an oligarchic system, or, more precisely, that it puts an end to the rule of the middle class and inaugurates the rule of the people. Although the revision has touched a number of distinct matters, the changes introduced into the composition of the electoral body are of such preponderant interest as to make the other innovations appear relatively insignificant. Belgium has 6,000,000 inhabitants. Before the revision it had but 135,000 voters. In consequence of the revision it will have 1,300,000 voters. The impression produced by these figures, however, requires certain modifications, the nature and importance of which will be indicated later.

The revision of 1893 was accomplished, on the whole, in a peaceful manner. But it was not carried through without trouble, and there were moments when the situation was decidedly critical. There are certain points in the history of the movement which, I think, deserve attention.

¹ The amendments to the constitution of 1831 were proclaimed as in force September 9, 1893.

I.

Belgium became an independent state in 1830, by breaking the bonds which united it to Holland. Its union with Holland, which lasted from 1814 to 1830, was the last epoch in a political history full of vicissitudes. Since 1713, not to go further back, Belgium was governed by the princes of the Austrian house. The "Austrian Netherlands" were an agglomeration of distinct states, organized on very similar lines, possessing a few common institutions, and forming from the point of view of international law an indivisible whole. The Bishopric of Liège was not a part of the Austrian Netherlands: this ecclesiastical principality belonged to the German Empire. The rule of Austria was followed by that of France. By the decree of the 9th Vendémiaire of the year IV (October 1, 1795), the Convention united the Netherlands and the Bishopric of Liège to the French Republic. It was during the union with France that the existing territorial sub-divisions of Belgium — its provinces and communes — were established. After the overthrow of Napoleon in 1814, Belgium was annexed to Holland; the two countries forming a single state. A "fundamental law," promulgated in 1815 by the new sovereign, King William of Orange, introduced into Belgium the constitutional form of government. It was not long before the union with Holland aroused in the minds of the Belgian people a lively discontent. Among the grounds of discord may be mentioned the difference of religion, the difference of language and the irritation caused by King William's absolutist policy. The Paris revolution of July, 1830, excited a corresponding movement in Belgium. In September, 1830, a successful uprising put an end to the union with Holland. A National Congress which assembled in Brussels, November 12, 1830, and acted in the name of the Belgian people, proclaimed the independence of Belgium, issued the constitution of February 7, 1831, and called to the throne Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, the father of the present king. After long negotiations, the treaties of November 15, 1831, and April 19, 1839, gave the sanction of

international law to the new position assumed by Belgium, and conferred upon it the character of a perpetually neutral state. Its neutrality is guaranteed by the five great signatory powers, Austria, France, Great Britain, Prussia and Russia.

Returning to the constitution of 1831, we have to examine more particularly those provisions which established the electoral system under which Belgium has so long been governed. The legislative body was composed of two chambers, the Senate and the Chamber of Representatives, both chosen by the same electors. To be an elector it was necessary, according to article 47, to pay in taxes a sum which was to be fixed by legislative enactment. The constitution, however, established certain limits, above and below which the legislature could not go. The electoral qualification was not to exceed 100 florins of direct taxes, nor to be less than 20 florins. These sums correspond, respectively, to 211.60 francs and 42.32 francs. In admitting a minimum qualification of forty-two francs and thirty-two centimes, the National Congress believed, in all sincerity, that it had shown great generosity toward the people. It was not thought likely that the legislature would ever be inclined to reduce the qualification to this point. The Congress itself had been chosen by an electorate which included but 44,000 voters in a population of about 4,000,000. Down to 1848 the qualification remained quite high. It was generally about 30 florins in the country districts, and in the large cities it rose to 80 florins.

The Paris revolution of February, 1848 — the revolution in which the constitutional monarchy of Louis Philippe went down — moved the Belgian middle class to make an immediate and considerable concession to democracy. On the 28th of February the ministry introduced a bill lowering the electoral qualification to the minimum fixed by the constitution. The amount was to be the same in the cities and in the rural districts. In this fashion the limit established by the constitution was reached much more promptly, beyond a doubt, than the authors of the constitution had expected in 1831. No further extension of the suffrage was now possible, save by the

more or less difficult and dangerous method of constitutional revision.

At this point a further explanation is necessary. The articles of the constitution which we have thus far considered were applicable only to the "general electors," *i.e.*, to the electors who voted for senators and representatives. They were not applicable to the electors who chose the nine provincial councils (*conseils provinciaux*) and the 2600 communal councils (*conseils communaux*) of the kingdom. The members of all these councils are chosen by direct election, but as far as they were concerned, the constitution of 1831 prescribed no electoral qualifications. In this field, therefore, the legislature was able to establish, and did establish, a much more democratic system than that which prevailed in the election of its own members. Provincial suffrage was given to all those who paid twenty francs in direct taxes, communal suffrage to those paying ten francs. To these two classes of voters, a law of August 24, 1883, added, in both the province and the commune, a third class, the so-called *électeurs capacitaires*, whose vote was based on the education which they had received, and was independent of any property qualification. The education required was that given in the primary schools, — reading, writing, grammar, arithmetic, Belgian history, geography, — and the possession of such an education was attested either by a diploma, by the position which the voter held or by a special examination. After the enactment of the law of 1883, the number of communal voters was estimated at 535,000.

Under these circumstances it was clear that the right of voting for members of the legislative chambers was too restricted, and men of intelligence had long perceived the necessity of extending it. Why, then, did so much time elapse before the reform was undertaken? The delay was partly due to the reluctance of the middle class to divest itself of the power which it had held for more than half a century, but mainly to technical difficulties and to the peculiar position of the Belgian political parties.

The extension of the suffrage involved the amendment of the

constitution; and the provisions of the constitution itself render its amendment extremely difficult. Article 131 provides that the legislative power must first declare itself in favor of a revision, and must indicate what provisions are to be revised. Such a declaration effects the immediate dissolution of both chambers. When new chambers have been elected, the new legislature passes upon the points submitted to revision. For the purpose of constitutional revision, two-thirds of the members of each chamber must be present; and no amendment can be adopted by less than a two-thirds' vote.

It will hardly be maintained that this method of amendment is the best conceivable. It certainly affords solid guarantees against recklessness and partisanship; but in the attempt to use it, difficulties have been encountered which the framers of the constitution did not foresee. These difficulties are due to the fact that the two political parties which have been contending for power in Belgium since 1830—the Catholic Party and the Liberal Party—are of nearly equal strength. Their contests, which have grown more and more bitter, have resulted in their alternate succession to office. Each of them, in turn, has obtained its majority only by serious exertions; and each has felt that its majority was precarious. Each of them, when in power, has hesitated to imperil its supremacy by reform experiments of which the issue was necessarily uncertain. What is more, each party had its special reasons for viewing an extension of the suffrage with disfavor. The Catholic Party, with its strong conservative leanings, felt an instinctive distrust of any measure which would increase the influence of the masses. The Liberal Party feared, and not unreasonably, that an increase in the number of voters would strengthen the position of the Catholics, particularly in the Flemish portions of the country, where the rural population is blindly submissive to clerical control. Finally, manhood suffrage had been seriously discredited in Belgium by the manner in which it had been employed in France to establish the second empire, which, by reason of its schemes of annexation, was the object of almost universal hostility.

After 1870, the situation underwent a gradual change, the importance of which was not fully appreciated by the governing class. The Napoleonic empire had disappeared. Democratic ideas, triumphant in France, were filtering into Belgium and gaining ground there daily. On the other hand, the Belgian middle class began to fall away from the Liberal faith, and to support the Catholic Party. Fear of socialism; a notoriously inadequate degree of intellectual culture; a remnant of attachment to its religious beliefs, which the Liberals had treated with too little consideration — these were the principal causes for the change which was taking place in the attitude of the *bourgeoisie*. After 1884, the Catholic Party remained in the uninterrupted enjoyment of power; and the Liberal Party, not merely defeated but torn by internal dissensions, viewed the future with discouragement. Under these circumstances, the latter party naturally abandoned, little by little, its opposition to the claims of democracy. At the same time, the growing strength of the Labor Party set the conservatives thinking. It was at last generally recognized that concessions were necessary. A proposal to revise the constitution was introduced into the Chamber of Representatives by a number of Liberal deputies on the 19th of November, 1890. Its consideration was ordered by the unanimous vote of all the members present. On the 10th of March, 1891, the government declared itself in favor of the revision. In 1892, the formal declaration that certain articles of the constitution should be subjected to revision passed both chambers without a single dissenting vote, and, after receiving the royal sanction, it was officially published, May 23, 1892. With its publication, the chambers were dissolved, *ipso jure*. In the elections of June 14, 1892, the Catholic Party obtained a large majority. In consequence, however, of some local reverses, it did not control two-thirds of the votes in either chamber. No amendment, therefore, could secure the majority required by the constitution, unless it was accepted both by the Catholics and by the Liberals. Between the different tendencies in the chambers some compromise would be absolutely necessary.

II.

The chambers met at Brussels, November 8, 1892. The Chamber of Representatives, which had the more important part to play, consisted of 152 members, of whom 92 were Catholics, and 60 Liberals and Radicals. These 152 deputies represented the Belgian middle class. There were not twenty of them who favored manhood suffrage. It is not likely that there was one who had even a presentiment of the result that was to be reached five months later. Taken as a whole, the Chamber assuredly had the liveliest desire to prevent the triumph of democracy and the admission of the masses to power. If this admission was inevitable, the Chamber desired that it should at least be accompanied by serious conservative guarantees. And yet, within a few months, manhood suffrage was established in a form which nobody had expected; and the conservative guarantees with which the Chamber contented itself were of an exceedingly fragile sort. It would be natural to assume that a result so surprising, so opposite to the apparent intentions of the Chamber, must have been forced upon the representatives by pressure from outside. We shall see later on that pressure was in fact brought to bear upon them; but it would be an evident exaggeration to ascribe the result wholly to any such cause. If the Chamber accepted a system which it did not like, it was because its internal divisions made it incapable of agreeing upon anything else, and because it finally became sensible of this incapacity.

The Chamber of Representatives personified a social class: it was a faithful likeness of the Belgian *bourgeoisie*. It is surely an instructive spectacle to see a whole social class so weakened by internal divisions that it ends in something like disintegration, and loses the power of defending itself against claims which it disallows.

Three different plans were proposed for widening the suffrage. The Catholic Party did not wish to go beyond a reduction of the electoral qualification; but according to its scheme, the reduction was to be coupled with a very important

modification of the basis on which the qualification had previously rested. The reform which it had in view would have worked to the advantage of the country districts, which are generally Catholic, and to the disadvantage of the towns, which are generally Liberal. According to the old article 47 of the constitution, the voter had to pay 42 francs 32 centimes in direct taxes. These taxes—real-estate taxes, personal taxes, business licenses (*droits de patente*)—are higher in the towns than in the rural districts. This difference is a natural result of the greater value of real estate in the cities. It is true, however, that in consequence of this difference the towns had more voters in proportion to their population than the rural districts; and in those election districts (*arrondissements*) which included both town and country voters—and the most important districts were of this character—the disproportionate influence of the towns was a disadvantage to the Catholics. In spite of this inequality, which they regarded as an injustice, the Catholics had for nearly ten years been carrying most of these districts by considerable majorities. Their success, however, did not satisfy them. The revision of the constitution seemed to them to furnish an opportunity for making their position still stronger, by securing the redress of their alleged wrongs. The government attempted to realize their desire. It introduced a proposition by which the right of voting was no longer to depend upon the payment of a tax, but on the occupancy of a house or an apartment of a certain value. Only—and this was the innovation which aroused the anger of the Liberals—the value of the house which was to give its occupant the right of voting was not to be as great in the rural districts as in the towns. The government proposed to establish in this respect a graduated scale of values, based on the division of house-property into three classes. What is more, the possession of a certain amount of land was to confer the right of voting, without regard to the value of the house which the voter occupied. These measures, of which I have indicated the leading points only, were intended, according to the Catholic Party, to raise the rural population from the decadence into

which it was alleged to have fallen. As a matter of fact, they would have given this part of the population, which is considerably larger than that of the towns, and is almost completely controlled by the Catholic clergy, a permanent power of out-voting the towns. The large cities — with their centralized control of commerce and industry, and their enormous accumulations of movable wealth; inhabited by the most enlightened classes of the nation, and representing the most advanced democratic tendencies — would have found themselves permanently divested of all influence over the politics of the country.

Of course the whole Liberal Party was vehemently opposed to a plan which would forever have destroyed its power. But as soon as it was called upon to express its own ideas, it showed the influence of two very different tendencies. The moderate Liberals wished to give the suffrage only to those who could prove that they had received a certain amount of education; but on the amount to be required the supporters of this plan could not agree. Some of them demanded a complete primary education; the others would have been satisfied with a requirement of ability to read and write. On its face, this last restriction seems a very slight one; but to perceive its real character the reader need only be reminded that the condition of primary instruction in Belgium is extremely unsatisfactory, and that at the present time, in spite of the real progress made during the last few years, more than one-fourth of the population is unable either to read or to write. The moderate Liberals thought that the educational qualifications which they demanded would exclude from the franchise not only a considerable part of the rural democracy controlled by the clergy, but also the less intelligent portion of the workingmen — particularly the miners — among whom socialistic and revolutionary doctrines were making rapid progress. The Liberals argued, moreover, that the extension of primary instruction and the adoption of the principle of compulsory education — which was a plank in their platform — would gradually reduce the number of the disfranchised and ultimately make the suffrage universal. These arguments were certainly good, and ten years earlier they

would have elicited the unqualified approval of the democratic party. But the march of events had been unexpectedly rapid. The workingmen, who had formerly cared nothing for party politics, had organized themselves. They did not admit that the right to vote should be made dependent upon the capacity of the voter. They remarked — and the remark was just — that the middle class had only itself to blame if the people were not better educated. It had been in power for more than sixty years. Why had it not taken more energetic measures to secure the diffusion of primary instruction? Why had it not followed the example of other countries, and established the principle of compulsory education at a time when there was nothing to prevent it?

The Radical Party, which had only a dozen adherents in the Chamber, declared itself in favor of manhood suffrage, pure and simple. They could not but recognize that the result, for a time at least, would be to increase the power of the Catholic Party, but they consoled themselves with the reflection that they themselves would obtain large majorities in the principal cities and in the centers of industry. Apart from all other considerations, the Radicals were obliged to advocate manhood suffrage because the industrial laborers demanded it, and because they claimed to be the champions of this class, and were trying to obtain its support.

These were the conditions under which the legislature took up its task. It was evident from the outset that the only way to prevent the triumph of manhood suffrage was for the two parties which represented the middle class to agree at once upon some other system. No such agreement was reached. Catholics and moderate Liberals, although of one mind in their dislike of manhood suffrage, persistently maintained the positions which they had respectively chosen and obstinately refused to take a step towards one another. Each of these parties seemed to cherish the secret hope that the other would grow weary of the contest and, for fear of a worse result, submit to a surrender. The moderate Liberals would have agreed to a property qualification, provided it were made the

same in the urban and the rural districts. The Catholics would have been willing to give the franchise to all citizens who had received a certain education, provided the others were subjected to a "differential" property qualification. Rather than accept a uniform property qualification, they would go to the point of granting manhood suffrage, which would have at least one advantage, that of quieting the agitation among the masses. This last point of view seems to have been that of the Catholic cabinet, which from the outset had contemplated without apprehension the possibility of a combination with the Radicals and a thoroughly democratic revision.

The labors of the legislature were long and arduous. They were carried on partly in the chamber itself, partly in a committee of twenty which it had appointed, and to which the various proposals submitted to it were referred for examination. These proposals were very numerous. They were all inspired by the desire of finding a compromise which might possibly secure the necessary two-thirds vote. In spite of variations in details, they all belonged to one of the three principal categories described above. None of them succeeded in satisfying the opposing interests of the Catholics and the moderate Liberals. The fundamental antagonism which divided the Belgian middle class frustrated all attempts at reconciliation. In the sessions of April 11 and 12, 1893, all the plans proposed were voted upon in the Chamber, one after another, and none of them received the necessary majority. After two years of preliminary labor, discussion and negotiation, the Chamber practically admitted its inability to solve the problem set before it. For the governing class, this amounted to a declaration of political insolvency. For the democracy, there was presented an admirable opportunity to intervene, to dictate its will, to realize its purpose, if necessary, by force. This opportunity was not neglected. The appearance of the Labor Party on the political stage—an event long foreboded—promptly occurred. The results have been sufficiently serious to justify a brief description of the origin, progress and organization of this party.

III.

The system under which Belgium had been governed since 1830 obviously excluded the representatives of the masses, the manual laborers, from the exercise of political power. It was of course possible for a workingman, by dint of labor and economy, to attain the degree of prosperity which carried with it political privileges ; but as a matter of fact, such a transformation of the workingman into the *bourgeois* was, relatively, an unusual occurrence ; and as a matter of principle, the possibility of such a transformation was no answer to the objections raised by the democracy. The real question was whether the manual laborer as such, even when he was not a capitalist, had not a claim to exercise some influence upon his country's destinies.

It is, after all, rather surprising that the agitation of this question in Belgium came so late. It was not seriously discussed until the working masses, conscious at last of their power, organized themselves as a separate political party.

The beginnings of this organization do not date more than fifteen years back. It includes the industrial laborers who are crowded together in compact masses, partly in the large cities of the kingdom, four of which have a population of more than 150,000, and partly in the mining regions, in the provinces of Liège and Hainaut. For the political development of Belgium, the existence of coal mines in these two provinces is a fact of very great importance. The coal supply has called into being numerous industries—foundries, glass-works, *etc.*—and the adult male workmen collected in these two regions are estimated to number about 150,000. Two other centers are Brussels,—where one finds, to be sure, only an agglomeration of little industries,—and Ghent, in the Flemish country, where the weavers, who compose the largest portion of the laboring population, are lineal descendants of the members of the powerful guilds that played so important a part in mediaeval history. The statistics put the number of adult male workmen employed in the larger and smaller estab-

lishments at about 300,000. In a country with only 6,000,000 inhabitants, such a body of men is a factor of considerable importance.

Labor troubles, struggles between capital and the pay-roll, had been as frequent in Belgium as in other countries. These contests were of a purely economic nature and had always a definite object : their purpose was to prevent a reduction or to obtain an increase of wages. The workingmen, as a body, did not concern themselves with social theories, and took scarcely any interest in the political struggles which absorbed the energy of the middle class. The first symptoms of a change showed themselves in 1880. At Ghent, in the heart of the Flemish region, in a laboring population of pure Teutonic stock, among whom the spirit of association had remained active, the Socialist Party was formed. This was only the first step. In April, 1885, at a congress held in Brussels, the Labor Party took shape as a political organization. From this time on it had a name, a platform and a regular constitution, with a standing general committee and yearly conventions. It does not appear that the congress of 1885 attracted very much attention or caused much disquiet among the governing classes; and yet, when the matter is carefully considered, this month of April, 1885, is one of the most important dates in the history of Belgium since 1830. From the moment when the workingmen gathered their scattered forces and determined to enter the arena of political strife, the destinies of the country began to take a different course.

Long before 1885 the Belgian workingmen had associated themselves in a hundred different fashions. They had formed mutual aid societies, coöperative societies, societies for social intercourse and amusement and, above all, boards and associations for fighting cuts in wages. The character, importance, duration and success of these different organizations varied with the circumstances which called them into existence. The formation of the Labor Party gave unity of purpose to these numberless one-sided endeavors. It concentrated the efforts which had previously been scattered. The numerous societies

and organizations which already existed began to affiliate themselves to the Labor Party, and this movement of affiliation is still going on at the present time. The Labor Party in fact consists of a union of small distinct groups. Each of these groups enters the party, as a rule, by joining an intermediate federation which includes, in some cases, all the laborers engaged in a single industry, in others, all who live in a particular district.

The line of action which has proved most effective in bringing about this concentration is worth describing. It is of an economic nature. At the risk of seeming fanciful, I cannot help saying that the symbol which most accurately represents the movement in which the laboring class is engaged is bread ; and it seems singularly fitting that the making of bread—the baking business—should have furnished, as it has actually furnished, the central point about which the diverse elements which constitute the Labor Party have grouped and united. First at Ghent, in 1880, and soon after in many parts of the country, coöperative societies were formed to furnish their members with the prime necessities of life, and especially with bread. This of itself was not a particularly novel thing; what was remarkable was that these coöperative societies from the outset combined with the satisfaction of their material interests the pursuit of a political object. Their gains were devoted to the propagation of socialistic ideas, to the publication of newspapers and pamphlets, to lectures and to the assistance of strikes. The workingmen—and they were numberless—who joined these societies from motives of economy, were thereby enrolled in the political army which was being organized. In most of the industrial centers there is to be found to-day a large building, known as the “people’s house” (*maison du peuple*), which contains the offices of the coöperative society, where bread, groceries, meat, beer and clothing are sold, but which also includes a library and a reading room and, besides these, halls in which the workingmen frequently come together, sometimes to deliberate upon the matters which interest them, sometimes to listen to music or lectures.

It may be asked whether the Labor Party includes all the laborers of the country. It does not. A considerable number of them are connected with no regular organization. On the other hand, the Catholic Party, taking a hint from its enemies, has been trying since 1886 to gather the workingmen into societies which it inspires and controls. These "Christian corporations," although they exhibit externally certain reminiscences of the middle ages, are coming more and more under the control of democratic ideas. It should also be noted that the workmen of the coal basin of Charleroi have joined the order of the "Knights of Labor." The organization of this society is surrounded by a certain secrecy, but its objects are substantially identical with those of the Labor Party. It may safely be said that the Labor Party includes the most active and zealous elements among the workingmen, and that the laborers who are not connected with it are either in full and unconcealed sympathy with its platform or at least show no hostility to its aims.

The aims of the Labor Party will be sufficiently indicated by saying that they look to the triumph of the political and social system known as collectivistic socialism. The fundamental principle of this system, as every one knows, is common or collective ownership of all the means of production, especially of capital and land. There is no need of dwelling upon the chimerical character of such an ideal. The more intelligent collectivists, however, are quite ready to admit that their ends cannot be even approximately attained except through a series of partial and preparatory reforms. These partial reforms, many of which are possible and some of which are perfectly reasonable, make up the serious and practical side of the Labor Party's platform. They are, in fact, only what modern democracy everywhere demands. Among the measures advocated by the Belgian Labor Party may be instanced: compulsory primary instruction; the attribution of corporate rights to workingmen's unions; accident, sickness and old age insurance; state ownership of the coal mines; the labor contract; limitation of the hours of labor; suppression of collateral inher-

itance and a heavier tax upon direct inheritances. I do not desire to be considered a supporter of this platform, or of any part of it; but I think it must be clear to every unprejudiced mind that some of these demands are at least worth careful discussion. It should be added that the party aims at the peaceful and gradual realization of its ideas; that it is not essentially a revolutionary party; that it regards revolution simply as a last resort—as an heroic remedy, and that it expressly repudiates any sort of connection with the anarchists.

An indispensable preliminary to the changes desired by the laboring class was the widening of the suffrage, or rather the establishment of manhood suffrage. It is not surprising that, for the sake of obtaining this result, it was ready for the last sacrifices and the last excesses. It is worthy of notice that the growing hostility to manhood suffrage exhibited by the two political groups which represented the Belgian middle class, was largely based on considerations of an economic nature. Catholic and Liberal speakers alike tried to discredit manhood suffrage by declaring that it would lead to socialism and collectivism. Tactically this was hardly a wise course. What was the use of insisting that this political discussion involved a discussion of the great social problem which disquiets our century? What was the use of proclaiming that a controversy concerning the franchise would bring different economic interests into antagonism; that it would lead to a conflict between those who had everything and those who had nothing; that it would end in a war between the classes and the masses? This was furnishing arms to the enemy. It would have been cleverer, I think, not to have recognized collectivism as a belligerent. All that was necessary was to insist upon the chimerical and impracticable nature of the collectivistic theories. Such an attitude would have permitted the Liberal Party in particular to show a more generous confidence in the intelligence of the democracy, and at the same time to exhibit a more robust faith in the soundness of its own doctrines.

The labors of the legislature went on without coming any nearer to a result. Mutterings of discontent began to spread

through the country. The hostility of the chambers to manhood suffrage was perfectly understood, and the Labor Party determined to employ means of external pressure. After exhausting the ordinary methods of manifesting the popular will — processions, meetings, resolutions, there remained the last form of pacific coercion with which the “proletariat” is constantly menacing “capitalistic society” — the “general strike,” or universal abandonment of labor. An alleged general strike had already taken place in the spring of 1891 ; and although it was not at all general and its success, on the whole, was doubtful, the workingmen imagined, and not without some show of reason, that it had induced the Chamber of Representatives to express itself more promptly in favor of a revision of the constitution.

It might easily be demonstrated, I think, that the pressure exercised by a general strike can never be decisive. The abandonment of the workshops will never be really universal, and the resources of the laboring class are clearly insufficient to enable them long to endure the results of voluntary idleness. But such a line of reasoning goes wide of the real question. What makes a general strike dangerous is the possibility that it may serve as the starting-point of a revolutionary movement. For seditious purposes, a mass of idle laborers, irritated by their privations, is a ready-made army. This became quite evident in 1893. When the Chamber of Representatives, in the session of April 11, rejected manhood suffrage pure and simple by a large majority, the executive committee of the Labor Party at once ordered a general strike. Most of the workshops were emptied, and almost immediately, at Brussels, at Ghent and at Mons, conflicts of a more or less serious character, attended in some cases with bloodshed, took place between the people and the armed forces of the state. It was clear that the country was on the verge of civil war, if not of revolution. The situation was full of menace, especially at Brussels. It is true that the precautions taken were so complete and the means of defense so ample that any attempt at insurrection would most probably have been crushed — but at what a cost ! The grav-

ity of the situation was suddenly revealed to every one. The Chamber of Representatives had sense enough to see that bloodshed would destroy the system which it represented. It would have been unpardonable to run the risk of a civil war for the sake of postponing a reform which, as every one admitted, was certain to be realized sooner or later. What all patriotic men desired was an honorable compromise. The Conservative government, after reaching an understanding with the Radical Party, had finally given its approval to a plan which was based in principle upon manhood suffrage, but which imposed certain restrictions upon its operation. Assurance had been obtained that the Labor Party would accept the limitations proposed. The critical nature of the situation silenced all objections and overcame all opposition. The proposal which had obtained the support of the government was carried on the 18th of April by an overwhelming majority — 119 ayes to 14 noes, 12 not voting. The country at once became tranquil. The acceptance of the proposal by the Senate, of which no doubt had been entertained, took place a few days later. The device which rendered a compromise possible was the adoption of what is commonly known as the "plural vote." This is the basis of the electoral system under which Belgium is henceforth to be governed.

IV.

The "plural vote," as established by the present Belgian constitution, may be briefly characterized as follows: While every adult male citizen has at least one vote, those who, by reason of their age and their position as heads of families, or of the fortune which they possess, or of the education which they have received, are deemed to present special guaranties of fitness, have one or possibly two additional votes.

Every male Belgian who has completed his twenty-fifth year, and has resided for at least one year in the same commune, is entitled to cast one vote. The following persons are entitled to an additional vote:

1. Every voter who has completed his thirty-fifth year, is

married or is a widower with legitimate children or grandchildren, and pays to the state a tax of at least five francs on the house in which he lives.

2. Every voter who owns real estate worth at least 2000 francs, or has an income of at least one hundred francs a year, derived from bonds of the Belgian government.

A voter who fulfills the conditions indicated under numbers 1 and 2 has two additional votes. Two additional votes are also granted, without reference to any of the preceding conditions, to every voter who gives evidence, either by the production of a diploma or by the exercise of certain functions (to be defined by an ordinary law), that he has received at least a complete secondary education. No voter has more than three votes.

It is estimated that under the new system there will be about 1,300,000 voters in Belgium, and that the number of additional votes will be about 800,000. The total number of votes for which the political parties will have to contend will therefore be about 2,100,000.

The rule of the old constitution, that every male Belgian who had completed his twenty-fifth year was eligible to membership in the Chamber of Representatives, was not changed.

The electoral system just described is applicable only to the Chamber of Representatives ; it does not affect the Senate. This does not imply that the composition of the Senate and the method by which senators are chosen have remained unchanged; on the contrary, innovations have been introduced here also by the constitution of 1893. The solution which the legislature, after protracted efforts, has finally given to this problem is far from being generally approved. It should be added, however, that public opinion, wearied by the agitation of the question of manhood suffrage, has devoted little attention to the reformation of the Senate.

Under the provisions of the constitution of 1831, the membership of the Senate was half of that of the lower chamber. The senators were chosen by the same electors. Since, however, it was generally agreed that the Senate must be above all things else a conservative body, representing the spirit of

order and tradition, guaranties were sought in the age and wealth of the senators themselves. To be eligible to the Senate it was required that the candidate be forty years old, and that he pay the state 2116 francs 40 centimes (1000 florins) in direct taxes. In those provinces where the proportion of persons paying this amount was less than one in 6000 inhabitants, the list of persons qualified was brought up to this proportion by adding the requisite number of those who paid the next highest taxes. This was a very high property qualification; and, taken in connection with the age qualification, it limited to a remarkable degree the number of persons capable of holding a senatorship. In 1893, in a population of 6,000,000, there were only 549 citizens, forty years old, who paid the tax required by the constitution; and after adding the supplementary provincial lists, there were hardly more than 1000 persons eligible. This property qualification gave an extraordinary privilege to a very small number of rich manufacturers and large landholders.

It was almost unanimously recognized that the constitution of the Senate was indefensibly bad. The high property qualification excluded from this assembly most of the men who, by virtue of their political experience or their personal capacity, might have rendered the most valuable services. The social class from which the Senate drew the greater number of its members — that of the great landholders — is far from rich in men of talent. Finally, since this body was chosen by the same voters who elected the members of the lower chamber, it was not able to exercise any real control over the latter assembly, but, as a rule, submissively ratified its decisions.

The evil was not so great as long as the lower chamber itself represented a sort of political aristocracy; but as soon as the more popular branch of the legislature began to voice the will of the whole people, the situation was entirely changed. In a really democratic state an upper chamber has a most important part to play. It must be so organized that it can exercise over the lower chamber a control that is effective without being oppressive. Under these circumstances alone can it offer

any real protection against over-hasty impulses of popular feeling.

In Belgium almost every one was more or less clearly conscious of this truth; and the plans proposed for the reorganization of the Senate were very numerous. It seemed to be thought that this body offered a free field for political experiments. A number of schemes were based upon the idea of the representation of interests; but these all came to grief in consequence of the difficulty of deciding just what interests might advantageously be represented. Indirect election was favored by many men of intelligence; but they were unable to agree upon the method in which the electoral colleges were to be organized. Some thought that special colleges should be established; others were in favor of vesting the election of senators in some existing representative bodies, such as the communal councils. As regarded the matter of qualification, it was freely admitted that the conditions prescribed by the constitution were too severe. There was a general feeling that the doors of the Senate should be opened, if not to every citizen, at least to all those who had given evidence of superior ability by attaining important political, judicial or administrative positions. To make the Senate accessible to all citizens of sufficient capacity, and to secure its stability and conservatism by a proper organization of the electorate—such were the lines upon which a satisfactory reform of the Senate might apparently have been reached.

The solution was actually reached on very different lines, and was far from satisfactory. Among the various causes which contributed to this unfortunate result, not the least effective was the obstinate resistance of the existing Senate. This body was opposed to any change which would disturb the vested privilege of its members. It was peculiarly hostile to the idea of admitting talent unattended by wealth. At the close of protracted discussions and petty conflicts, and by means of a series of compromises, a result was attained which, on the whole, preserved the chief abuses and inconveniences of the previous system.

The Senate is henceforth to consist of two classes of members. The first class is chosen, in each province, by the same voters who elect the members of the Chamber of Representatives. The new constitution, however, authorizes the legislature to raise the age qualification of senatorial electors to the completed thirtieth year, and a law to this effect has already been passed. The number of senators thus elected is equal to half the number of representatives.¹ To be eligible in this class, the candidate must be forty years old, and must pay to the state 1200 francs in direct taxes, or be owner or life-tenant of real property, the annual income from which is assessed² at not less than 12,000 francs. In the provinces where the number of persons possessing such a qualification does not reach the proportion of one in each 5000 inhabitants, the list of eligibles is brought up to this proportion by adding a sufficient number of the next largest taxpayers. Citizens placed on such a supplementary list are eligible only in the province in which they reside. These conditions are somewhat more liberal than those of the old constitution, but they are of such a character that the privilege accorded to the large landholders remains almost intact. The number of persons eligible to the Senate in this class certainly does not exceed 2000.

The second class consists of senators chosen by the provincial councils. From two to four are chosen in each province, and the entire class at present numbers twenty-six. They must be forty years old, but no property qualification is required. They must not be members of the assembly which chooses them, nor have been members of this assembly during the two years previous to their election. The provincial council, as its name implies, is a body concerned with the affairs of the province. Its powers are very similar to those of the French *conseil général* or of the English county council. Up to the present time it has been chosen by voters paying to the state twenty francs in direct taxes, or

¹ The Chamber of Representatives has at present 152 members.

² The annual value as assessed for purposes of taxation is as a rule considerably less than the real value.

possessing a certain amount of education, but it is certain that this franchise also will be placed before long upon a more liberal basis.

In spite of the changes just noted, it must be said that the attempt to reform the Belgian Senate has miscarried. It may be urged, however, in behalf of the Belgian legislators, that the proper constitution of an upper house is a most difficult problem, the solution of which baffles the wisdom of the most experienced statesmen.

I have set forth in brief the changes in the Belgian electoral system introduced by the reform of 1893. The text of the constitution has undergone some other changes ; but as these have only a secondary interest, I may be pardoned for leaving them unmentioned. I refrain also from noticing certain plans of reform, such as the *referendum*, which involve questions of prime importance, but which failed to secure the necessary support in the chambers. I must, however, call attention to one new provision which is connected with the reform of the electoral system—that which makes voting compulsory. In the elections of members of the Chamber of Representatives or of the Senate, failure to vote will henceforth constitute a misdemeanor, punishable by law. To lessen the severity of this rule, the constitution provides that the vote shall be cast in the commune, except in those cases where the law shall otherwise ordain.

V.

It would be rash to attempt to-day a positive forecast of the manifold results which the recent constitutional revision will entail. These results will manifest themselves only little by little, but they will surely end by bringing about a great change in the political and social condition of the country. The extension of the suffrage will probably result at first in gains for the Catholic Party and in the consolidation of its power. But in the bosom of this party itself, democratic and reformatory tendencies of a somewhat socialistic character are already revealing themselves. A group of bold spirits will be

formed which will urge the alliance of the church with the masses, and which will advocate measures of a more or less radical character. Their influence will undoubtedly lead the Catholic Party to support certain innovations which up to the present time it has obstinately opposed. In this way, for example, the furnishing of a substitute for military service will probably be prohibited. The democratic Catholics, however, will form only a relatively small group, and their taste for novelties will not go beyond the bounds which it may please the ecclesiastical authorities to establish. The Catholic Party, as a whole, will remain what it is — a conservative party, hostile to modern ideas, and above all a clerical party. Its principal object will always be to assure the triumph of the church and the supremacy of its doctrines.

The opposition, before consolidating itself, will undergo a complete transformation. The Liberal Party was essentially a party of the middle class in the large cities. This social class owed its long supremacy to the restrictions imposed upon the franchise. Now that these restrictions have almost entirely disappeared, the influence of the middle class will be destroyed by the overwhelming vote of the laboring class. Democracy will remain mistress of the field in the manufacturing cities and the industrial centers. Almost everywhere the Liberal deputies who now sit in the legislature will be replaced by democratic representatives.¹ The platform of the democratic party will be strongly influenced by socialistic ideas. It is possible that some of its demands will be granted, more or less reluctantly, by the conservative Catholic Party. Taxation will be more justly distributed than it is at present ; the provisions of the labor contract will be more precisely regulated ; perhaps the system of compulsory insurance will be introduced. There can, however, be no doubt that a conflict will arise be-

¹ [M. Vauthier's article was written nearly a year ago, and the revised proofs left his hands before the late general election ; but the results of this election (October, 1894), the first held under the new constitution, have strikingly confirmed his anticipations. The Chamber of Representatives chosen in 1892 consisted of 92 Catholics, 48 Liberals and 12 Radicals. The new chamber is composed of 104 Catholics, 29 Socialists and but 19 Liberals. — Eds.]

tween the conservative Catholics and the socialistic democracy ; nor can there be any doubt that the conflict will be a bitter one. It will be envenomed by the distinctly anti-Catholic and irreligious spirit which, in Belgium as in France, animates the greater part of the laboring class, and which is still dominated by ideas and feelings directly derived from the French Revolution.

The situation, accordingly, is not without serious perils. The party which calls itself "Progressive" or "Radical," and which will succeed to the greater portion of the political estate left by the moderate Liberal Party, has no taste for disorder and wishes to reach its ends by legal means. In a word, it is still a middle-class party. But it has behind it the Socialist Party, which it cannot control, with which it will not dare to break, and in which violent measures inspire infinitely less repugnance. Can it be hoped that the laboring masses, permeated as they are with revolutionary instincts and crowded together in a few industrial centers, will patiently submit to the opposition with which a clerical and probably reactionary government, supported by an agricultural population, will certainly meet their demands? That a period of conflict is imminent seems certain, but it is not possible to foretell its course. It may culminate in revolution ; it may resolve itself into a series of peaceful compromises.

An unfavorable element in the situation is the peculiar position of the Liberal *bourgeoisie*. Assailed with equal animosity by the Catholics and by the socialistic Radicals, it will be deprived for a time of all political influence. Its disappearance from the field will leave the extremists face to face. The Liberals will not sympathize with the endeavors of the demagogues, but they will certainly lend no support to the Catholic ministers, whose policy runs counter to their most cherished convictions.

Unfavorable, again, is the extent to which the conflict between parties is becoming economic. It seems probable that we shall witness a real struggle between classes, a war between capital and labor. Economic conflicts in Belgium are

not intrinsically more desperate or irreconcilable than in other countries ; but the excessive prominence given to questions of a material nature and an unfortunate indifference to ideals will probably add to the bitterness of our internal dissensions.

On the other hand, great reliance may justly be placed upon the good sense and the eminently practical spirit of the Belgian people. It will not permit itself to be dragged down a precipice with its eyes shut. Manifest exaggerations will give rise to wholesome reactions. It may be hoped, accordingly, that Belgium will escape the double peril with which it is menaced : that it will neither be wholly subjected to ultramontane control nor be wholly guided by revolutionary demagogues. If this hope is to be realized, it is indispensable that the Liberal Party, now in so evil a case, shall reorganize itself and recover its legitimate influence. Such a reorganization, although it may not come for several years, will surely be attained in the end. The chief mistake of the Liberal Party was its failure to comprehend soon enough that a great movement towards democracy was about to take place. Whether it be deplored or applauded, this movement has come. What the Liberals have now to do is to reconcile themselves to the new conditions and frankly accept the consequences of universal suffrage. The power of the masses must be recognized as a fact which it is useless to discuss. When it has reached this point, the Liberal Party, strengthened by adversity, rejuvenated and democratized, will be in a position to take advantage of the reaction which will surely set in against Catholic intolerance on the one hand and against the barren agitations of the extreme socialists on the other ; and it will have an opportunity to fight effectively for the principles of order and of liberty which have heretofore constituted the glory and the strength of Belgium.

MAURICE VAUTHIER.

UNIVERSITY OF BRUSSELS,
October, 1894.